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Lessons from Locked-Down Learning

A survey of teachers and students has revealed both the trials and triumphs they experienced when teaching was conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 isolation restrictions in place earlier this year.

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As much as COVID-19 has been a curse unleashed on the world, I realised during the lockdown period of remote learning that it was a perfect opportunity to reframe my Extended Investigation of Australian secondary school education. By surveying the experiences of both students and teachers during these extraordinary times, I could propose pragmatic methods for successfully implementing online education.

Student Survey of Digital Learning Experiences

For the 'Student Digital Learning Experiences' survey, 249 Year 7–12 students from both campuses of independent school Beaconhills College participated.

The majority (54%) reported that they 'mostly' understand how their school is handling online classes, and 35% say they 'completely' understand. Likewise, the majority (41%) reported that their school had 'mostly' explained what the government had been communicating to schools regarding the handling of COVID-19. However,

the second-highest group (26%) reported that the school had only 'somewhat' explained the government's communications and the third-highest (19%) said that the school had comprehensively addressed what the government had said.

Half (50%) of the students reported that they were 'focused,' 'work well at home' and 'feel productive'; 34% reported that they were 'somewhat focused' and 'mostly get work done at home' but 'feel like [they] are lagging behind sometimes.' Additionally, 15% said they were 'not really focused' and that their 'time was being spent unproductively at home.' One-third of all participants felt like they weren't being entirely productive with online learning, and another one-eighth said they were not being productive and couldn't fully complete work.

When students were asked about how they felt about the effect of quarantine on their secondary school education, responses consisted of mostly cautious optimism: 46% say they were not worried about the future of their education

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and that they could ‘get on with [school] just fine;’ 35% weren’t sure about how worrying they thought the future was, but felt they ‘probably could get on with [their academic] goals;’ while 12% were worried and 7% were extremely worried that quarantine had affected their education.

On a scale of 0–10 for experiences of stress during online learning, the average rating was 4.74. While this was significantly lower than I had expected, it must be noted that dejection, fatigue and stress were much greater towards the very end of the online learning period (21 May) than when the majority of the survey answers were submitted. I observed this stress anecdotally through casual conversations with fellow students and from observing student discussions with teachers during class over time.

Although 43% of students reported that they didn’t experience internet disruptions, as many as 35% did experience disruptions that infrequently affected their ability to engage in online learning. Furthermore, 7% reported that they frequently experienced internet disruptions that severely affected their ability to engage in online learning. This shows that internet stability is a common issue in the households of independent school students. When extrapolated, this effect could become more concerning for lower socioeconomic groups with poorer internet speeds, and could also be exaggerated in rural schools where unstable internet connectivity is more common.

Although 39% reported that they didn’t experience any disruptions from fellow classmates, 48% reported that students disrupted the class once or twice and 12% reported that their classmates are ‘sometimes disruptive’ or ‘repeatedly disruptive’ and ‘compromise the workflow

[of the lesson].’ This indicates that disciplinary actions need to be taken, even in an online space, to maintain student and teacher focus.

The majority (61%) of students reported that ‘most’ of their teachers understood how to use videoconferencing software effectively and that their teachers ‘don’t often experience technical difficulties that waste some class time.’ However, 27% reported that ‘some’ of their teachers did not understand how to use videoconferencing software effectively and spent ‘a fair portion of the class time trying to sort out technical difficulties.’ This shows that most teachers have adapted and are tech-savvy enough to understand how to operate computer software to enable their teaching, although one-quarter require more experience and possibly training to optimise their workflow.

In students’ opinion, common subjects best suited for online learning include Maths, English and Humanities. One student mentioned that Humanities works because uploading work on Showbie is a simple process. Another student mentioned that students can focus better on textbook Humanities work at home than be distracted in class.

In students’ opinion, common subjects that aren’t suited to online learning include Science and practical subjects such as Design Technology, Food Technology, Art, Dance, Music, Drama and Physical Education.

Students suggested several ways to improve their online learning experiences. Many Year 7–12 students cited workload as their main grievance, with some reporting high levels of stress because of it. Overwhelmingly, they wanted much less homework, or even work in general. Many other students reported that they wanted to spend less time videoconferencing or

Learning in the Time of COVID

Learning History online was a strange yet enjoyable process. Teachers and students had to adjust to a new-yet-temporary status quo. Although difficult at times, with adversity comes adaptation.

On the positive side, while physically distant, classes managed to interact and accomplish learning in this odd environment. Online learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams do not easily accommodate interactive learning, but we acclimatised to our conditions. These platforms, while cumbersome, inadvertently encouraged patience.

The large number of historical sources at our fingertips online has always been a great resource. Research tasks continued in much the same way as before, using both textbook knowledge and online resources from the wider historical world.

On the negative side, it was much more difficult to have deeper discussions on our topics due to our isolated circumstances. Focusing for long periods of time was a struggle due to the distractions that working from home can provide.

Despite the occasional hiccup, online learning went surprisingly well. Students were challenged by the circumstances and generally felt a sense of achievement at having adapted successfully.

While online learning is an undesirable and inferior forum for learning, with the aid of our teachers, students adapted to the circumstances while continuing to learn.

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at their screens, with some experiencing headaches and eye strain. Some wanted shorter class times with more focus on content, and then allowing students to practice/revise in their own time. Some students were concerned about Zoom's controversies, including privacy issues and the potential for 'Zoombombing' by online intruders.

Teacher Survey of Digital Learning Experiences

Fifty-one teachers responded to the 'Teacher Digital Learning Experiences' survey. The majority of teachers responded from both campuses of Beaconhills College, although a few teachers responded from outside schools after being referred from Facebook. Almost half of respondents (46%) teach senior school, 37% teach middle school and 17% teach junior school. One person teaches at a Catholic school, one at a virtual school, 25% of participants teach at government schools and 73% teach at independent schools.

Some 71% of teachers either liked or mostly liked the refinements that their school made to the curriculum as a result of quarantine, 6% were indifferent, and the remaining 6% 'didn't like' or 'hated' the changes. However, 17% picked the 'Other' category and said that 'the curriculum hasn't changed'; rather, the 'mode of delivery and submission of work' and 'pacing' had changed.

Almost half (45%) of teachers liked or mostly liked the government-mandated changes to the curriculum (e.g. VCAA's amended study designs), but 29% were indifferent towards the curriculum changes and said they 'don't know if they are fair or necessary.' The teacher working at a virtual school experienced 'virtually no curriculum changes, only modified workload for students.'

Teachers experienced some specific challenges in delivering online content. They said:

- Zoom breakout rooms did not have the 'usual ability to monitor [students] whilst helping others.'
 - Some students were 'unable to or found it difficult to connect to online classes, which created large gaps in schooling for some students. This, in turn, perpetuates a greater burden for teachers.'
 - 'Google Meet (despite being more reliable software) included communication issues (e.g. parents not speaking English, or EAL students).'
 - 'Sharing screens is a pain. Having to flip back into the room to change a webpage.'
 - 'When students don't have cameras on and microphone are muted, it is difficult to know when they are there.'
 - 'Cannot meet one-on-one for child safety reasons, which makes things more difficult for students who respond better verbally. Also, more difficult for students who are camera/microphone shy.'
 - Internet access issues for themselves and students.
- Teachers experienced some general challenges in delivering online content, such as:
- 'providing constant parent support'
 - 'no delineation between home and school'
 - 'missing face-to-face contact'
 - 'longer working hours' and 'more time spent preparing classes'
 - 'keeping a sense of rapport in a class'
 - 'not being able to give real-time feedback'
 - balancing work and home life (e.g. 'kids', 'marriage', not working too hard)
 - 'kids playing games instead of listening to my class'
 - 'kids putting teachers on mute' to do other things

- ‘not being tech-savvy and being forced to use software’ (e.g. Compass, App4, ClassNet.)
- ‘receiving more emails’
- chasing up and marking more work.

Although 75% of teachers said that their internet is adequate, one-quarter reported moderate to severe internet connection/speed issues that limited their ability to upload and download large files. This once again shows that internet infrastructure is not well-suited for online learning in Melbourne. Furthermore, public school teachers seemed to experience a slightly higher proportion of internet issues than independent school teachers.

The majority of teachers (55%) reported being stressed ‘a little bit, but there are a few times where [they] feel overwhelmed’ trying to keep up with online teaching, while 28% reported that they are stressed ‘sometimes but can feel overwhelmed.’

In keeping with the student survey, 49% of teachers reported student disruptions ‘once or a couple of times,’ while 18% said that ‘sometimes [their] students are disruptive and interrupt the workflow.’ However, 31% said that they had not experienced student interruptions. This also furthers the point that student discipline and management still needs to be upheld in an online learning space.

With the ability to select multiple options, the most common concerns and limitations teachers had in regards to accurately assessing students during the lockdown period were:

- authenticating student work legitimacy (17%, thirty-five responses)
- levels of concentration and immersion for the students (15%, thirty-two responses)
- checking in with students’ progress (14%, thirty responses)

- timely submissions/preventing tardiness (14%, twenty-eight responses)
- transparency and honesty from students about their academic struggles (12%, twenty-five responses)
- other (4%, nine responses)
 - parents who helped their children during tests
 - building relationships with students.

Teachers reported that the subjects best suited for online learning were English, Maths, Humanities and computer-based subjects. Although there aren’t specific numbers for the proportion of Humanities teachers surveyed, several responses that reference Humanities provide specific reasons for why subjects such as History, Geography and Extended Investigation work well in the online learning space. Often, teachers who cite Humanities also add that a lack of a practical component favours success. Researching and presenting still work well, and there are plenty of resources for students to use once tasks are set for them.

In contrast, teachers reported that Performing Arts (e.g. Dance, Drama, Music) and subjects requiring practical classes (e.g. Science, Physical Education, Design and Technology, Wood Technology and Food Technology) were not suited for online learning. These subjects are similar to the ones reported by students, showing that teachers experience struggles in the same areas as students, possibly compounding the difficulty for both parties to deliver content successfully.

The teachers reported many things they had learned from teaching online.

- ‘Most of the school day is taken up with unnecessary curricula.’
- ‘Taught me a range of new skills to be implemented in my normal classroom.’

A History Student’s COVID-19 Learning Experience

The study of History is incredibly versatile, as many sources are available online. For my classmates and I, the majority of the work we completed during regular classes was digital. The adjustment to remote learning therefore required minimal modifications except for communication in the classroom.

Social interactions with students and teachers deteriorated with the closing of schools. Video classes were tricky to navigate as many people are camera-shy or worried about interrupting others. This disconnect between people has reduced the bouncing of ideas and collaborative work.

For students with access to a reliable internet connection and devices, the hinderance to productivity could be minimal. This created a chasm of disparity for students, often impacting regional students to a greater extent. Furthermore, the demand for technological proficiency was abrupt. The shift in environments and methods of learning provided a challenge for students.

Some people prefer learning in the comfort of their homes while others thrive in a classroom setting. Online learning requires a level of self-discipline that many people struggle to maintain, myself included. Distractions around the house can be very tempting and engagement is enormously difficult to maintain through a screen. This led many students to either grasp the chance for independence and become better learners or disregard the work, inevitably falling behind. However, I was very lucky to have well structured but flexible lessons that kept me busy while not overwhelming my workload.

The coronavirus enabled History students to understand how varied are peoples’ experiences of such a disrupted world rather than to generalise.

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- ‘Much of my subject could be adapted to work exclusively online, which opens up all kinds of distance education possibilities.’
- ‘Consistency and variety are important to ensure students know what to expect in the meetings.’
- Students need ‘variety’ and ‘not too much of a screen.’
- Some students are ‘happier doing online learning, but the opposite is also true.’
- Teachers need to be very ‘flexible.’
- Use of videos has improved.
- ‘More depth’ has been seen in student work using Google Docs for classwork.
- Students can be ‘more independent’ than previously realised.
- Giving feedback in several ways is more beneficial.

Common issues that teachers would like fixed to improve their online teaching experiences were:

- student/class participation (e.g. polls, quizzes, discussions, debates) (32%)
- platforms for external assessment (e.g. software specifically for virtual exams and tests) (27%)
- intuitive software—sometimes functions in software can be hard to find and disorienting (15%)
- audio quality in videoconferences (12%)
- other (9%)
 - teacher well-being/feedback
 - lack of student interest due to technical difficulties
 - lack of cohesion/too much spreading between different digital platforms (e.g. App4, ClassNet, STILE)
 - ‘cutting of red tape to use programs’
- video quality in videoconferences.

Finally, teachers overwhelmingly said that they would like to continue using digital teaching methods. Many different reasons were cited, including:

- providing better feedback to students
- not needing to have physical copies of documents/digitally backing up
- recording and uploading videos
- better support for struggling and absent students (e.g. chronically ill students)
- Google Drive to upload and share files
- more quizzes to prepare for SACs.

Conclusion

From these survey findings, it can be concluded that digital education, although being used exclusively in a pandemic context, has many challenges and flaws but there are also many reasons and potentialities to continue using it. Both students and teachers recognise it was not only a necessary measure to enable schooling to continue during the public lockdown, but see that feedback, catching up with work, and recording and archiving work for future use are all useful things to do.

In future, digital learning can be used more extensively than previously realised to support students and optimise teacher workflow. More research is required to compare how students and teachers progress through the year without the compulsion to use digital media as much. It would also be interesting to see if teachers will continue using digital techniques as much as they said they would now that on-campus school has resumed.